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Dreams of Glory

Know Thyself

Personal intelligence opens a privileged window into our own minds as well as into the most byzantine motivations of others. Personality psychologist John D. Mayer, who codeveloped the theory of emotional intelligence, unpacks an idea that has profound ramifications for how we see ourselves.

By John D. Mayer Ph.D. published March 11, 2014 - last reviewed on June 9, 2016



What does it mean to possess personal intelligence?

People who display such an ability understand themselves and know who they are. They evaluate others more accurately and therefore make more allowances for others' foibles; they are better at acknowledging their own limitations, too. Those who are talented at this reasoning power make better guesses about how people are likely to behave. And they have a generally good idea about how their acquaintances, colleagues, and friends perceive them—they know their own reputation. At still deeper levels, these individuals recognize that their perceptions of the people around them might require revision at times.

There are no courses to learn how to read people, no institutions where the highly perceptive among us hang out. And so, I began by consulting biographies for examples of people who appeared unusually insightful in this area. Katharine (Kay) Graham's account of taking over as publisher of *The Washington Post* is a case in point. Graham had been married to Phil Graham, the *Post*'s publisher, but in 1963 he committed suicide after years of struggling with bipolar disorder. In the aftermath, Graham changed her life's direction. I found some personally intelligent reasoning in her self-descriptions in her book *Personal History*.

 Image: Dart board with powerful words pinned on it

After her husband's death, Graham made the newspaper's success her mission, exhibiting a sense of direction that drew on her self-knowledge. She could have sold the *Post* to interested buyers, but she declined. She wrote: "...having stood by my father and husband as they built [the paper] with such zeal and devotion, I would never sell; it was unthinkable." She mulled over the possibility of taking over the *Post* and running it herself, prudently soliciting opinions

she had never before managed any company. She openly acknowledged her inexperience to her colleagues at the newspaper. Graham thought a great deal about how others perceived her: Only some of the staff welcomed her presence, while others viewed her as "an ignorant intruder," and most staffers likely didn't care.

She sought out people she could trust and rely on for guidance. And as she began to run the paper, she was troubled by the sense that her own leadership was a step down from her husband's. She puzzled over this idea until she realized that although her husband was in fact an exceptional leader, she and her colleagues might have exaggerated his talents in their recollections. She concluded, "Not only had I mythologized him, but others shared the same idolatrous view."

One key to personal intelligence is the ability to distinguish our perception of another person from who the person really is—or, in this case, was. Graham realized she had made things harder by comparing herself with an idealized view of her husband. She acknowledged his genuine strengths and also realized that she would need to develop her own leadership style.

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Some people might wonder if she weren't actually using *social* rather than *personal* intelligence, yet if she were, she would have been far more focused on issues of power. She would have attended more to the social aspects of the organization, including the levers of control—whom to reward, whom to punish, and with whom to exchange favors—as well as to understanding the different factions in the office. Although Graham no doubt thought about these matters as well, her focus was mainly on the personalities of those around her and on herself.

Personal intelligence also differs from emotional intelligence, a theory that I developed with Peter Salovey of Yale University in the late 1980s. As important as emotions are, they have little to say about people's intentions, traits, motives, or life stories. After Salovey and I published our first two papers on emotional intelligence in 1990, I began to look for common rules and principles that people use to think about personality—starting with the rules used by personality psychologists themselves.

 Image: 2 pairs of glasses labeled brave and dangerous

and I conducted a study for which we examined biographical information of eight well-known business leaders—Warren Buffett, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Charles Schwab, Martha Stewart, Donald Trump, Jack Welch, and Oprah Winfrey. We assembled quotes and life data for each person and, based on this information, independent judges (who didn't know how we ranked these leaders) evaluated the individuals for personal intelligence. Winfrey, who has spoken openly and often about her self-knowledge, ranked highest. The average judge ranked the leaders' personal intelligence similarly to the way we had.

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The Minds of Others

Our personality is the sum of our mental processes; its job is to integrate our mental energy with our capacity for thought and self-control, and to help us express ourselves in our surroundings. We draw on our personality to manage our health and safety, to find the right environments to be in, and to draw on group alliances for protection, companionship, and a sense of identity. To succeed, our personality must

can pick up signs about our health or stress levels from our faces and bodies; they read signals about our social status from our environment, and they gauge us according to the skills and the social interactions we exhibit across the myriad situations we face each day. Like it or not, our personalities leave behind clues to who we are in each of these domains.

The more accurate our mental models of people, the better we'll know how to interact with them. Two founders of the field of social cognition, Susan Fiske of Princeton and Shelley Taylor of UCLA, wrote about the many challenges we face in trying to understand others—our preconceived notions, stereotypes, and memory weaknesses among them. With such challenges acknowledged, we can establish models of other people that will help us anticipate what they'll do or need. The effort we put into constructing such mental representations will depend on our own purposes. Fiske and Taylor pointed out that we sometimes behave like "cognitive misers" toward others, saving our attention for perceived key people. We don't need to spend much time understanding the people who slip quickly in and out of our lives—the man in the beret waiting at the bus stop or a fellow customer who darts in front of us for a carton of milk in the dairy aisle.

At other times, however, we encounter people with whom we are likely to interact for the long term; our overall well-being may depend on how easily and positively we can relate to them. To promote positive interactions with a given individual, we apply our personal intelligence to the clues we have gathered about him. Naturally, we will make better decisions if our models are accurate.

President John F. Kennedy, for example, studied the personality of Nikita Khrushchev, then the premier of the Soviet Union; Kennedy had arranged to meet Khrushchev in Vienna to establish agreements between the two nations. In the early 1960s, the Cold War pitted Communist nations against capitalist states and the world's leaders stared down the possibility of nuclear war. According to biographer Michael O'Brien, "Kennedy prepared meticulously, searching for clues to Khrushchev's character, personality, and thoughts. He trimmed appointments, creating more time for solitude and study." Kennedy's developing view of Khrushchev was of a deliberately unpredictable, occasionally crude and boorish leader; an elfish charmer at times who could, however, veer quickly into bullying domination.

Kennedy decided that rather than referring policy questions to his secretary of state, as had President Eisenhower, he would impress the Soviet leader with his knowledge of foreign relations, discussing policy issues one-on-one with him. In this way Kennedy hoped to exhibit his confidence, knowledge of international relations, and charm and charisma.

Even when we do our best to size up another person, however, we may miss the mark in key ways. Given our tendency to brush ambiguities aside, we may be overconfident in our assessments and fail to anticipate how people might react to us. Kennedy advisers Dean Rusk and George Kennan warned the president, in fact, to meet the Soviet premier only after specific policy agreements were reached. But Kennedy disagreed and held the meetings as soon as he could. In this and other calculations, some have argued, the president overestimated the allure of his own charms and underestimated Khrushchev and the lengths to which the Soviet leader would go to dominate an opponent.

After three days of meetings, Kennedy, a decorated World War II PT boat commander, told James Reston of *The New York Times* that his exchange with Khrushchev was the "roughest thing in my life. He just beat the hell out of me." He also concluded that he had appeared weak, exacerbating the two nations' troubles. Paul Nitze, then assistant secretary of defense, said the meetings between the two were "just a disaster." But perhaps not all was lost. Kennedy later concluded that he had learned from the meeting, and this helped him to navigate his next challenge: his successful defense of West Berlin during the Soviet challenges to its control. The president believed that his understanding—his mental model of Khrushchev—had become more accurate as a consequence of their meetings, and with it, Kennedy's effectiveness as a leader had improved.

Memory, Identity, and the Future Self

life's direction. Among the obstacles we face: Our self-concept arises from many diverse information sources, stored in different parts of our memory. The cognitive scientist Ulric Neisser said that we tuck away information in various pockets of memory, and in each area we store different information, including our global self-concept, our autobiographical memories, and our conscious here-and-now self .

Homer Hickam's recollection of his youth in his book *Rocket Boys*, chronicled by Hollywood in *October Sky*, highlights examples of these different selves and how these memory stores—the procedural, semantic, and episodic, among others—contain information relevant to understanding ourselves.

Procedural memory contains instructions on carrying out actions physically—to tie one's shoelaces or drive a car. As the child of a coal mine supervisor in Coalwood, West Virginia, Hickam was a natural target for sons of disgruntled mine workers; he had to learn how to fight, how to protect himself, and when to run. This procedural knowledge is part of our doing, active self.

Everyone also possesses semantic memory: a long-term store that contains our general knowledge. Hickam filled his semantic memory in part with knowledge he learned in school; he could retrieve

$9 \times 12 = 108$ without reference to a classroom or teacher. But some semantic knowledge is more personalized, including lists of our own characteristics.

A third form of long-term memory is episodic:

autobiographical recollections of specific events from our past. As Hickam recalled, one of the key events of his boyhood was watching the Soviet satellite Sputnik travel across the night sky; after that, Hickam organized his friends around a project to launch a homemade rocket. Following diagrams in *Life* magazine, they jammed explosives from cherry bombs into a tube, attached the tube to his mother's beloved white picket fence, and ignited it. After a deafening explosion, the fence, but not the rocket, launched into the air and crashed down, burned to embers.

His mother sent him out to wait for her on the back steps. He expected to be chewed out, but to his surprise she asked, "Sonny, do you think you could build a real rocket?" When he hemmed and hawed, she expanded on her question. As she saw it, he had no life direction, his father didn't think much of him, and he needed to get out of Coalwood for a better future. Hickam retrieved all this from his episodic memory. He remembered, too, that his mother touched his nose and told him: "Show your father you can do something! Build a rocket!"

Homer's friends, too, encouraged him to construct a vision of a future self that included rocket blast-offs, science fairs, and winning the respect of classmates. Our future selves guide us: Hickam would go on to do these things and to spend a portion of his ----- career at NASA.

Meeting with Your Worst Self

To truly know ourselves, we must inevitably grapple with painful information. The story of David Carr, now a journalist at *The New York Times*, illustrates his sophisticated reasoning about personality and his capacity to cope with his own psychological pain, as well as the advantages of being open to personal information that can be especially hard to accept. Carr began his professional career as a reporter in Minneapolis in the 1980s. Toward the end of that decade, he was arrested and jailed multiple times owing to his abuse of alcohol and crack cocaine. As his addictions grew worse, he began seeing a woman who was a local drug dealer, and during this low point she became pregnant and gave birth to twin daughters.

Personal intelligence (as with any intelligence) can be present among people with personal difficulties—including individuals who experience problems with drugs and alcohol. After several unsuccessful attempts at rehabilitation, Carr was finally able to maintain a state of sobriety for a prolonged period. He drew motivation from a growing sense that his daughters needed him. He started to turn his life around. He gained custody of the twins, and in the 1990s he began his ascent in journalism—from the editor of the Minneapolis-area *Twin Cities Reader* to editor of the *Washington City Paper* in the nation's capital, then to *The New York Times*.

Sometime after this, Carr took a leave to write his memoir, *The Night of the Gun*. With video recorder in hand, he interviewed those in Minneapolis and elsewhere who had known him, sometimes employing a detective to help him

his twins, and reviewed letters from his earlier life. He wrote that the experience had been "like crawling over broken glass in the dark. I hit women, scared children, assaulted strangers, and chronically lied and gamed to stay high. I read about That Guy with the same sense of disgust that almost anyone would: What. An. Asshole."

Yet by this time, he could face information about himself without too much flinching. Part of personal intelligence is putting together information, synthesizing it, and extracting from it understanding and reconciliation. Carr's project required him to rethink his self-concept. He was, as he described himself, a "complicated asset" as a friend during those years. He wrote that he "was a guy who presented significant upsides; when it was fun, it was really fun." But he had a dangerous side as well, often pushing people well past their comfort zones. This sort of accuracy and nuance in self-modeling is a hallmark of personal intelligence. Intelligences enable people to reason about a matter at hand, to see ideas from different angles, and to arrive at good answers.

Carr's life story includes two selves—a testament to how much we can change. Accounting for his earlier self while writing his personal history, he felt he had little in common with his younger self. Although Carr keeps his two selves separate to a degree, he also maintains a connection to the earlier reality of his life, saying that the distance between his two selves is part of what kept him writing his memoir—to describe that earlier guy "until he turns into this guy."

allows us to see ourselves and others with greater fidelity—and this fidelity includes an understanding of our own fallibility. Seeing ourselves clearly isn't always easy. Information about who we are is "hot" and emotionally charged—that heat can warm or scald us. We may focus on a personal flaw so much that we lose perspective on the broader contours of life. It's easy to turn away at times, and indeed, we all do. Yet if we work over time to learn a bit more about ourselves we may become more accurate at self-understanding and this, in turn, can help us change for the better. Because although many aspects of our personalities persist over time, there is also opportunity for change.

 *Image: Book Cover: Personal Intelligence by John D Mayer Phd*

*Adapted from Personal Intelligence: **The Power of Personality and How It Shapes Our Lives.** © John D. Mayer, (Scientific American)/Farrar Straus Giroux, Feb. 2014)*

 *Image: Book Cover: Personal Intelligence by John D Mayer Phd*

Probe Your Personal Intelligence

1) People who exhibit self-deception are likely to:

- A. Dislike the reality of their situation and lie to others about it
- B. Want something badly, hold a false belief about it, and make excuses to justify that belief, hoping to get their way
- C. Fear failure and criticism
- D. Be subconsciously aware of the truth, but act falsely

- A. Self-conscious
- B. Active
- C. Sympathetic to others
- D. Valuing ideas

3) Jan is in medical school and wants to become a surgeon.
To motivate herself, she should:

- A. Develop a vision of herself in her current year of medical school learning everything about surgery and impressing her superiors
- B. Imagine her father's high expectations of how she ought to perform
- C. Keep an image of her future self as a highly successful surgeon
- D. Keep a view of her future self as a failed surgeon and do everything in her power to avoid such an outcome

4) A person feels he is being observed by others and worries that he doesn't measure up as a social companion and that people will be unfriendly. This individual may appear _____ to others.

- A. Antisocial
- B. Disagreeable
- C. Shy
- D. Anxious

Answers

contradictory evidence and making excuses for themselves—all to achieve a personal goal.

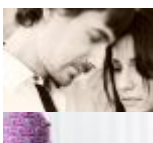
2) C: Research into traits indicates that people who are straightforward and modest are also likely to be sympathetic to others.

3) A: Keeping an image of one's future self as successful can be helpful at times, but if that possible success is overly inflated, trying to meet that goal can be discouraging. By comparison, developing a vision of oneself carrying out the near-term steps that lead to success can be equally or more important.

4) C: The feeling that others are watching us is fairly common, particularly among shy people. The shy also share the sense that they may not measure up as social companions, and they fear that others may not treat them well.

A NOTE ON THE TEST: *Personal intelligence is a rich and broad ability; it typically takes many questions to estimate a person's overall capacity to reason about personality. This small sample of items will not provide a complete picture of your actual personal intelligence. Copyright © 2014, John D. Mayer, David R. Caruso & A. T. Panter*

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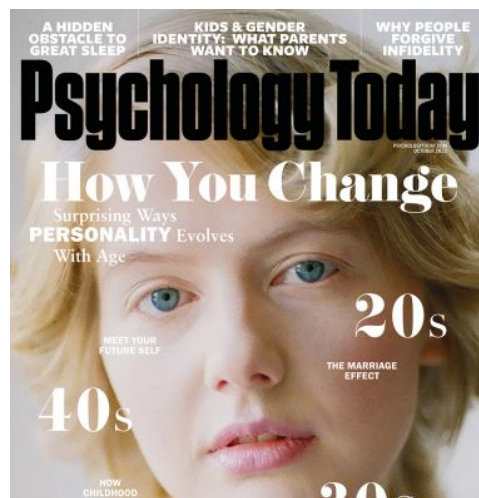
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